Prolific: Memos on Creativity, Productivity, Work and Fulfilment

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Consistently Good or Erratically Brilliant?

"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant." Robert Louis Stevenson

The pressure to produce in a results and metric obsessed society continues to grow. Television and success stories on the Internet portraying a world of instant success and riches don't help. People have now come to expect quick transformation when they take on an endeavor. They start off hungry and enthusiastic, believing that greatness is around the corner, but when the road turns out to be twistier than expected they become despondent just as easily.

True, some do accomplish a lot in a short space of time. But in most instances success is a marathon rather than a sprint, where consistently good wins over erratically brilliant.

Success is little more than a by-product of effective application. If you wish to be a good businessman, mathematician or athlete, your profit, solution or medal is borne out of your training, execution and persistence. Many romanticize over the trappings of success -- usually money and recognition -- but they overlook the planting, weeding and watering that precede the harvest.

And that's what the memos which follow center around: feeling empowered to act and being effective when you do. They comprise of my most popular posts and book extracts. I believe these memos will provide you with a practical and relevant take on contemporary life and its challenges. There are no shortcuts or 'hacks,' but rather logical, imaginative ways to be creative, productive, consistent and centered. And when you turn these qualities into habit, an inspired life will inevitably follow.

PART I: Productivity and Creativity

How to have a Creative Day

Plans require diligent execution if they are to be realized -- one must be industrious and occasionally be willing to work long hours. Ideas and creativity exist in a non-physical realm and work by a different set of rules though. People who put long hours in may generate a high volume of output, but you will find they seldom produce original work -- a fatigued mind isn't conducive to creativity.

There comes a point where thinking 'harder' about something doesn't produce anything new because when you try to think hard you merely think deeper along the same limited lines. Often you need to take your brain away from the coalface and let it cool off before it can be creative.

Periodically taking a full day or longer to unplug and indulge higher order thinking will see a rise in new perspectives and fruitful ideas. EBay's president John Donahue shared his view: "In today's 24/7 work culture, I believe the notion that business leaders need to be connected warriors every day of the year is mistaken. I am very connected fifty weeks of the year, but I try to completely disconnect for two weeks. I admit that the process of cutting off from email and the internet is frequently stressful in the beginning, but it quickly becomes a very liberating experience. Without a constant barrage of work issues to respond to, I find that my mind calms down and my intuition begins to come alive. I am able to see things through a more creative lens and new ideas often emerge from my 'time off'."

A creative day is not quite the same as a day off: it's a deliberate process where you lay the platform your brain needs to be inventive. At the beginning of such a day (or the night before), write your key objectives down: it could be a problem that needs solving or something you're looking to create, like a song, movie or book. Keep your objectives simple and few in number.

Once listed have a brief look at your objectives then put them aside. You need to direct your creative energy and objectives serve to provide this direction.

Thereafter, how do you spend this creative day? By meditating, sitting still, walking around and doing mundane, undemanding tasks. You can even go for a drive, as long as you keep the radio off. The idea is to withdraw your mind from the usual cacophony it deals with: email, music, television, ringing phones, noisy open plan offices and demands from other people. Give yourself less to do and react to. Ideas start to flow when you give your mind breathing space. As useful thoughts come to you, immediately write them down on the same page that you listed your objectives, because it's very easy to forget an idea or insight.

In the interests of maximizing effectiveness there are some basic disciplines you should observe:

• Ensure you're well rested.

• Keep your home quiet -- have every electronic contraption except your refrigerator and stove switched off. Have your phone on but switch off all instant message alerts.

• If you use a computer or tablet for something like writing or note taking then keep your Internet connection off -- no browsing the Internet unless it's for research directly attributable to your objectives.

During the course of this day it's okay to occasionally get distracted or feel restless. If this happens, go for a walk or take a small nap but don't switch the television on or log on to the Internet. Music is a gray area but it's preferable not to engage it. While music can feel soothing it also stimulates the mind, and before you know it your mind becomes a swirling pool of uncorrelated thoughts again. As long as your objectives are clear and mind unfettered, the ideas will come forth without much effort. Stillness begets creativity.

Working at the Crack of Dawn

People who have projects, ventures or businesses outside their normal 9 to 5 jobs have to climb a daily hill called fatigue. It becomes difficult after a full day of "normal" work to push on with your personal (but important) interests. If you stay up late you're exhausted the next day -- sleep deprivation is short sighted and isn't the answer.

Consider doing some before-hours work. Carla White created an iPhone application called the *Gratitude Journal* during the hours of 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. before going to her day job. Her initial morning efforts have now turned into a full-time career for her.

I used to have the same problem: the only time I made any decent progress was on weekends, two out of seven days in the week. I was often too tired and very unproductive after getting home from my 'normal' job. However when I started waking up half an hour earlier on weekdays with a fresh mind and the beautiful silence of dawn as company, I started achieving a great amount before proceeding with the routine parts of the day. This is the time for creative, higher order thinking. The rest of the world is still sleeping and now you have your time all to yourself. Just thirty solid minutes can yield immense progress.

So don't think that after-hours is the only time you can work; you should try to do a brief early morning stint to reduce the after-hour work. This also frees up more time on the weekend (if you're working this hard you will probably use your weekend to sleep in).

I believe the morning to be the best session for most because you're at your freshest mentally; importantly your head hasn't been filled with the usual discord of noise, information and stimulus that a modern person faces daily. Your brain is tired at the end of a weekday because it is hard pressed to process all the things it has been exposed to during the course of that day. Not all hours are equal and you are very likely to achieve much more in a fresh morning hour than a tired evening hour. So here's the trade-off: go to bed earlier and wake up earlier. Reduce television time and Internet browsing in the night and climbing into bed by about 9 or 9:30 p.m. is far from impossible.

Remember you can and probably still will work in the evening; it's just a good idea to split your tasks between dawn and dusk. Important work must be done when your slate is clean and pencil sharp, the rest can be done after sunset.

Ready your Stations

"Give me six hours to chop a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Abraham Lincoln

Notice how a large manufacturing concern will always take ample time to properly lay out a new assembly line, even if it means delaying production for a few days. Having machinery in close proximity that's laid out in a sequential manner will reduce process times and lower manufacturing costs. Those few extra days taken to carefully lay the line out will be paid for within the first few weeks of production.

This principle of preparedness can be extended to practically any undertaking, be it taking the time to sharpen an axe before chopping a tree, the mechanics of a Formula One team spending hours to meticulously pack and unpack their tools before a race, or a chef laying out all his implements and ingredients before cooking. The time to do these things almost always ends up being time well invested.

Especially when your workload is high and deadlines tight, you may often be tempted to just dive into a task. But taking time to plan and ensuring all your tools are ready almost always ensures you finish sooner than someone who just starts and worries about logistical details later. Tidying up, ensuring everything is in its place and that there's a place for everything feels tedious and time consuming, but once everything is at your fingertips and your workspace is clear you will work efficiently, harmoniously and happily.

It's not so much a question of simplicity or complexity, it's a question of frequency: If you do the simplest, most brain-dead task multiple times then you need to have your workspace clear and the tools you use properly laid out. Because even the smallest efficiency improvement is compounded when you do anything multiple times. This is why an effort to properly prepare pays for itself within a short space of time.

Scientist, Doctor of Medicine and stem cell research pioneer Robert Lanza's theory of biocentrism has seven principles, one of which states:

Our external and internal perceptions are inextricably linked. They are different sides of the same coin and cannot be divorced from one another.

The mind and physical reality mirror each other, so if there is clutter in your environment then your mind will start to perceive clutter. Therefore having a neat, well prepared workspace is about much more than efficiency or pleasantry; it leads to improved mental well-being too.

Fifteen Pivotal Minutes

When you have a part time business or work on anything outside of your 9 to 5 job it can be hard to get a decent stretch of time for your extracurricular pursuits. Factor in family and domestic commitments, and it becomes difficult to find just one uninterrupted hour. This is where you have to start working in smaller increments.

Life's busy and there seldom seems to be enough time for anything except work and some errands. But life also occasionally gives us respite. Meetings are cancelled, negotiations get delayed, reviews postponed. On some days, your body is even able to wake up a few minutes earlier (usually when your previous day was less stressful than normal). While these "respites" you get are often little more than deferments, they do give you time you didn't have before. And when such occasions arise, you need to maximize this new-found time given to you.

Admittedly, trying to do something whenever one spare minute arises is unfeasible, but anything upward of fifteen minutes can be used for fruitful, productive activity to further your own interests. When most of us have a spare fifteen minutes we usually spend it playing with our smartphones, chatting on instant messenger or watching television snippets. It feels like too short a period to do anything worthwhile, so most simply “kill time” doing passive, sedentary things.

Especially in the mornings when your mind is fresh and you're in an idea-inducing state, fifteen to twenty minutes can produce a list of three novel marketing ideas, provide the concluding paragraphs to your book, fix the bug in your programming code, or map out the next five years of your life on a clean piece of paper.

You don't need to complete what you're doing; you just need to set creative direction or make progress towards a plan. For the short time that your concentration is wholly committed to something, your next great idea or life-changing moment can spring forth. To quote Oliver Holmes Sr: "A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience." Fifteen minutes can be pivotal.

I suspect that your brain is more prone to creativity in these explosive time-limited sessions because it knows it has limited time and that it doesn't have to concentrate for too long. Therefore it doesn't hold back. Your own will to make the session worthwhile also nudges the brain along. The parameters of scarce time and adversity can be used to your advantage.

The ultimate situation we want of course is to have several hours of uninterrupted time daily, but until you make your side-line business a full time affair, or become a fully-fledged musician or writer, then these little pockets have to become the units of time you deal in.

Waiting for what you feel is a decent period of free time can amount to procrastination. If you step back and do the math after just one month, you will find that all these little pockets compound to a substantial lump of time, all of which will take you that much closer to your goal.

Don't Study in a Group

I don't know about you, but in five years of high school and five more years of university not once have I had a successful study session where friends or colleagues were involved. A study group is meant to cover and understand one section at a time, together. The idea is that where one member falls short in understanding the others can step in and assist. The group structure is in place to support and motivate. In spite of everybody's best intentions though there are simply too many factors counting against study groups:

Sky-high likelihood of getting distracted

Every time a colleague has a question or feels they just want to vent about something unrelated, your concentration gets broken. If someone feels peckish they will recommend a lunch break for everyone; or the mere mention that they're going to the cafeteria for something will break your concentration anyway. Phones will inevitably ring and beep. There's seldom a decent stretch of uninterrupted study time when you're with other people.

The timetable isn't tailored to you

You can be rushed or held back if the differential in information uptake is great between study group members: some take longer to understand than others. The pace at which the group moves therefore will never be optimized for you. You're either going to be forced to catch up by taking short cuts or hold yourself back to wait for others.

Where you may be familiar with a topic and only require an hour of revision, most of your colleagues could be weaker at the subject and insist on devoting a full day to it. Of course you're free to study something else in this time, but then that defeats the entire purpose of the study group.

The logistics involved

When you're at home you just take your notes to the nearest quiet table and study. Anything needed is at home with you. If you go somewhere to study with a group you need to firstly ensure you pack everything you need and secondly make the trip to wherever the study session is. This logistical effort seems small but there's also the return trip to consider, and by the most optimistic estimation the effort to pack up, travel and then eventually return home will take at least thirty minutes, usually forty five. This time could be spent revising an extra topic. Add up that time over just one week and consider what you could get done in that period.

How clever is your group?

Being in a group may increase the odds of somebody knowing something that others don't, but it doesn't preclude the possibility that everyone has the wrong understanding of a topic. The group mustn't just be a bunch of friends deciding to study together, especially (and I don't mean this in a nasty way) if they're all borderline students trying to scrape a pass. For a study group to work its makeup needs to comprise of students with varying abilities in different subjects/sections, without any overall laggards to hold the others back. This in theory sounds fine, but in practice

finding yourself in such a group is highly unlikely, especially given the societal pressure you will be under to study with your friends.

There comes a point where being in a group is counterproductive and everyone simply works best in isolation. Teamwork is not always the solution. Universities have tutorial sessions (known as homework in school) where practice examples are looked at and questions can be asked of a qualified tutor. Remember too that most lectures permit questions. Any more interaction than tutorials and lectures I fear is often more of an excuse to socialize than achieve anything fruitful.

Create More, Tweet Less

Whatever your industry, it's the question that inevitably comes up when the conversation turns to marketing and promotion: "What's your social media strategy?" Marketing cannot be ignored, but amidst the social media craze people are forgetting that marketing is a layer that's built on the foundation of a great product or piece of work.

Said Bryan Adams of song writing: "Social media is a giant distraction to the ultimate aim, which is honing your craft as a songwriter. There are people who are exceptional at it, however, and if you can do both things, then that's fantastic, but if you are a writer, the time is better spent on a clever lyric than a clever tweet."

You and your wares need an online presence for people to detect you -- being off the grid is disadvantageous. People are misplacing their efforts however when they spend more time promoting than creating. If you're garnering 'likes' or 'followers' then you aren't working at your craft. Your can't do both simultaneously and while active promotion is an undeniable pillar of selling your product, it also fragments your concentration when you are trying to create something to actually sell. Social media updates and hype-building are not going to write your song, book or business plan.

Social media activity needs a block of time each week allocated to it. In my opinion it shouldn't be something you spend time on every day. Spending hours 'networking' online can be a low yield exercise. To a degree one must also let serendipity play its role: Where one person finds your work, appreciates it then enthuses about it to their peers and friends. The Internet and yes, social media, are great enablers of this. But much of the sharing needs to be left to others, because realistically you can't control what people choose to share. This type of organic reputation cannot be bought by posting Facebook updates or tweets, it can only occur when there's something exceptional worth talking about.

Planning for Procrastination

There is a Japanese proverb revering the importance of planning: *Measure twice, cut once.*

Planning helps ensure you take the best action in the interests of meeting an objective. For a large project, spontaneously making decisions while things are in motion will inevitably lead to mistakes. Planning automates the implementation process as each action is pre-determined, and this in turn facilitates smooth execution.

Many things though do not need planning. Using project management principles in your personal life is not always wise. In this age where we are encouraged to write everything down, people want to plan and strategize even the smallest of things before getting down to doing them. It's not just the small things however: certain larger undertakings like getting fit do not really require a plan either. To get fit you need to put your cross trainers on and start running. Run enough and there's absolutely zero chance you won't become fit (even with a bad diet). No planning needed. Just do.

While planning is often wise, it means nothing without physical action. And by insisting on a plan for every small thing you:

• Make a task more convoluted and harder than it has to be by breaking everything down into unnecessary detail. To go to the convenience store you would get into your car and drive there. Putting this into a plan can make the same process look a lot more difficult: Walk to car, open door, place key in ignition, start car, reverse out of driveway, drive to store, park car, enter store...it already sounds tiring just reading it, much less doing it. A tedious sounding plan can mislead you to over-estimate the difficulty of a task.

• Create an additional barrier to overcome before action can be taken. The absence of a plan is often unconsciously used as a stalling tactic. "I haven't started yet, admittedly. I need to draw up a plan with actionable steps," I've heard people say. They may sound determined, but they're essentially saying: I have already delayed, but let me delay some more by deciding to sit down after this conversation and draft a plan that will detail the action I will take some time in the future.

As mentioned above, a plan facilitates smooth implementation, but it is not implementation itself. Strictly speaking you have made zero progress after drawing up a plan. Planning is simply putting thought to paper, but it isn't changing anything beyond that piece of paper. Progress begins when action starts.

Many see a plan as a statement of intent that both encourages and tracks progress, but planning is a task in itself and can in fact hinder rather than encourage action. Before planning, decide first if a plan is needed at all.

Is Goal Setting Overrated?

For a batsman to score a century (100 runs) in any variant of cricket is a huge achievement. To score 300 runs i.e. a triple century places you in elite company. Since 1930 only 26 batsmen have done it. Hashim Amla recently became the first South African batsman to ever reach this milestone, scoring 311 runs against a much vaunted English bowling unit. At the time of writing, he is rated as the best One Day International batsman in the world and third best test batsman (don't worry if you don't understand the cricket terminology. Suffice to say, he's one of the best at what he does.)

Known for his absolutely relaxed, Zen-like approach (a cricket game can become verbal, even derogatory), you would think Amla had been contemplating this goal of 300 runs since he was a kid in school. His years of hard preparation and visualizing would then culminate in London, July 22, 2012 at The Oval ground, providing a fairy tale ending for the lad who worked at his craft for years and never let go of his dream.

Yet this is what he responded with when asked if scoring 300 runs was a dream come true: "I didn't dream about getting 300. I've always been a person who never sets goals. In many ways that helps you because you can keep going without being limited."

Time and again the most successful batsmen and indeed sportsmen are the ones who are able to play each ball and each game on its merits. A game is won one goal, run, try or home run at a time. The big scores and milestones come as a by-product. We live in a goal-obsessed, target driven society which focuses on the result rather than the process. Amla built his score of 311 one run at a time, batting for a marathon thirteen hours. It wasn't built by incessant visualization or by writing his goal down and looking at it each morning.

Constantly striving for something you don't have starts to make one feel hollow about life. The danger is you can start doing things in the interests of meeting this goal instead of taking the best course of action based on the present situation you are facing. The irony is that by taking the best course of action based on the present, you will by default make inroads towards any goal/desire you may have.

Ambition is a good thing, but quantifying too many by turning them into goals turns that ambition into a burden that actually hinders you more than it drives you. If you're feeling goal fatigue, maybe its time to play life one day at a time. Not having a goal doesn't mean you lack ambition; it means you're too focused on your game to worry about arbitrary statistics and milestones.

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PART II: Mindset

You're Good Enough

It's one of life's biggest dilemmas: You're pursuing the career you feel for, yet rejection keeps meeting every attempt you make. After a certain number of rejections the idealism erodes and most people resign to a mundane or safe choice like accounting or engineering; and in most cases it's something they couldn't care less about.

Maybe I'm not made for this, you start thinking out aloud to yourself. The idealism of doing what you love for a living gets replaced by the reality of having obligations and responsibilities to tend to. You lower your aim to something that can earn a good, stable income. Anything more, you concede, is for the lucky or well connected.

Actor Michael Fassbender has been in many blockbusters lately, but his start to acting was anything but stellar. As a nineteen year old student at the Drama Centre in London, he found the first three or four years "very sticky between paying drama school fees and surviving." His first acting role of substance came in 2001 in HBO's *Band of Brothers*. The rest, as they say....was more struggle. Subsequent offers didn't come as he expected. "I came to Los Angeles and did auditions for television. I made a terrible mess of most of them and I was quite intimidated," he recalls. "I felt very embarrassed and went back to London. I got British television jobs intermittently between the ages of 23 and 27, but it was very patchy."

Between the erratic once-off roles he managed to land, Fassbender took on odd jobs like unloading trucks and bartending to survive. He even had a stint following up on complainants who weren't happy with their service from the Royal Mail, to see if they were satisfied with the manner in which their grievances were dealt with.

After much uphill, today we find him as the alpha male in movies like *X-Men: First Class* and *Prometheus*. People wrongly feel that they need to go for broke and sacrifice everything if they are to achieve something worthwhile. Michael Fassbender didn't feed on restaurant leftovers or doggedly assert that he would rather die than earn his living without acting. He persisted with his search for acting roles, yes, but while he sought those roles he was practical and did other things to sustain himself. In the midst of unloading trucks and listening to incessant complaints on the phone, he kept his vision vivid and his dream alive.

There's no guarantee what you want will happen -- that's the truth -- but there's no reason to give up on it either. You can keep pursuing your objective, the one you truly want, and the only time you will fail is when you quit. You don't know when it will happen, how it will happen or even if it will happen at all, but if you quit then it's because you chose to, not because you were forced to. "My goal was for acting to become my main income. I would say to myself, 'I'm good enough.' That became my mantra."

Can you take Advice from Someone that isn't Successful?

Robert Kiyosaki said that you should take advice from rich people, not sales people. He explained that buying financial products from brokers i.e. the salespeople you would earn modest returns at best and instead make the broker rich from the fees you pay him. You are better served listening to a rich person that has actually made money.

Kiyosaki's wisdom resonated with me so much that I proceeded to adopt this attitude towards all facets of life. If someone advised me on money and they weren't rich I would reject their advice and think to myself: *If that's true then how come YOU aren't rich?*

My stance was consistent: be it single people giving relationship advice or scrawny guys sharing workout tips. If you wanted to tell me how to do anything, you had better be at the pinnacle of your game. I firmly held this view until a personal situation saw me sitting on a counselor's couch. (Never thought I would see the day, but sometimes you can only get a balanced, constructive viewpoint from a stranger.) I didn't know anything about her personal life beyond the fact that she was married and had one child. Here was someone I couldn't measure against my standards for success, so I was forced to take her advice without pouring it through my usual filtration system, and instead just practice what she told me. Paying for her time was also incentive to try her advice.

The routines and exercises she shared turned out to be very helpful. I realized with some shame that the success levels in her life should have had little influence on my assessment of her advice in any case. In fact her situation was irrelevant. What matters is whether her suggestions work for me, not for her.

When a person opens up to you it's usually out of genuine concern. You have the right to reject what they say and not all advice is properly thought out or fundamentally sound. But one should never dismiss a person based on their situation. So gauge the message, not the messenger. People who cannot make their own advice work for them don't deserve to be ignored because the problem may be in the way they implement their advice, not in the effectiveness or fundamental soundness of the advice itself.

Imagine that a poor friend tells you to invest in real estate when you want to buy a pricey new luxury car. Because he isn't rich you ignore him and buy the most expensive car you can afford. Ten years down the line you cross paths with him: he's now wealthy and you're still somehow in debt. You finally believe his advice because he has the results to validate what he told you ten years ago; but you also just delayed your financial progress by ten years because for the past decade you felt he wasn't worth listening to.

In the end, your prejudice prejudices you the most. A drunkard can provide valuable insight into preventing alcoholism and a person that's studied many businesses (but not started any themselves) can share pitfalls that a budding entrepreneur should avoid. Try to assess what people tell you against your knowledge, experience and common sense -- not against what you think constitutes a qualified opinion-maker.

Discipline is Misunderstood

If you see exercise as sacrifice or pain that you have to endure then in the long term it isn't going to work out for you. It should be incorporated into your life in a natural way: as something enjoyable rather than laborious. Our sedentary lifestyles are the only thing that's unnatural in this arrangement. Exercise becomes a healthy addiction once you get a rhythm going and you feel good after every workout. Your endorphins go up, the heart beats strongly, oxygen circulates, blood flows and your body relaxes because it has no other option after being physically exerted. Simply put, it's one of the best feelings you can have.

Everyone knows they should exercise and getting over initial lethargy is the problem most have. People are usually knackered after work and it seems a better option to go home, watch some television, eat, then go to sleep. When you're mentally tired, you feel physically tired even if your body was hardly exerted. Your drained mind fools you into thinking that your body is fatigued too.

Here's the thing: Once the initial choice is made, the hard part is done. When you start jogging in the mornings for instance, you don't have to think about the fatigue and sweat that comes from a run. All you need to do is get your cross trainers on and walk onto the road -- don't think further than that. Once you're on the road you will simply start running. You're unlikely to go back into the house now. The toughest choice you had to make was to get your shorts and shoes on. Breaking your choice down to the essential parts is a trick you can use to coax yourself into exercising. Making the choice is usually harder than actually doing it. Soon enough these decisions become habit and then your routine (and physical condition) will start to change.

Discipline is the cornerstone of success. It is the ability to repeatedly take the right choice over the convenient one. A disciplined person is one who will choose working out over going to the bar after work, or learning a new skill instead of slumping in front of the television. In short, a disciplined person is one who chooses the option that will yield longer term benefits over the one that will provide instant gratification.

Be self-aware when you are faced with more than one option. This expands to every facet of your life, not just health and fitness. Measure the benefit each choice will give you and keep picking the one that will take you places.

Extract The Happy Uprising: A Passionate yet Pragmatic approach to Fulfilment

The Cost of Regret vs the Cost of a Failed Attempt

If you fail at something you suffer some or all of the following:

• Some public humiliation.

• Lost money.

• Time that was consumed with trying (and the opportunity cost of that time e.g. it could have been used for a pleasurable pursuit like watching a big game or movie).

• Personal disappointment and despondency.

• An (often brutal) exposé of your shortcomings.

But if you don't try you forego the following:

• Any chance whatsoever of succeeding.

• The stage (i.e. real life) to learn and develop your talents, and fix your shortcomings.

• The experience of pain that will grow your resolve (which happens after the initial disappointment).

• The inevitable probability that after a certain number of attempts you will have the right blend of ability, approach and resources to succeed.

• The exhilaration of achievement and the immense reward that follows when the abovementioned ability, approach and resources come together in the interests of a common outcome (i.e. your goal).

If you don't give something a proper go, the walls of the rut you're in will grow higher and the change you desire becomes more and more of a pipe dream. Even the most cynical among us have to agree: the cost of a failed attempt is lower than the cost of stagnation and regret.

Perseverance is not the same as Stubbornness

When things don't go to plan it's natural to start questioning whether you are on a feasible trajectory. Maybe this wasn't meant to be, you start musing. People around you will mostly sing the usual chorus that hard work pays off as they encourage you to persist. Nobody wants to sound negative even if they harbor strong doubts.

Sometimes though the decision you made at the outset can be wrong. No amount of persistence or creative marketing will yield any sizeable success if you're trying to sell ice to Eskimos. Sell them snow mobiles though and you have a much better footing on which to build further successes. If you want to get to another country as quickly as possible, it's better to step into a plane than to board a cruise ship and persuade the captain to increase ship speed. The initial choice is key.

"Sometimes you have to give up the fight and walk away, and move on to something that's more productive." Donald Trump isn't a likeable person but his words ring true. You owe it to every idea you start to devote all your smarts and effort to it, but if it continues to bear no fruit then you have to think carefully and decide what's best moving forward: persist or abandon ship and start afresh? It may hurt to acknowledge a failure, but your decision must be guided by what's best for the future, not on what has already passed. Trump adds: "I've learned that there's a big difference between perseverance and stubbornness. Stubbornness involves me forcing things to work, while perseverance requires me to work consistently with what's already working."

Motivational catchphrases like be positive and never give up need to be taken with a pinch of salt. They are emotional without much acknowledgement of the actual conditions, and can inadvertently encourage you to punish yourself as you persist at low yield endeavors.

Making a wrong decision is not the end of the world, but it can be if you refuse to correct it. The hole you're in will continue to deepen if you persist with something that’s fundamentally wrong. Just as you must be willing to work hard, so too must you be willing to radically adjust course where necessary. Heart and head need equal input.

Problem Compression

Prior to embarking on a venture or quest it's a good idea to plan thoroughly. A plan is a set of pre-determined actions that are triggered either at a specified time or the occurrence of an event. Having a blueprint with contingencies in place can prevent heartache later on. A good plan also helps to ensure that opportune moments are maximized -- it isn't only about damage control or risk management.

By the same token the planning phase can become an exercise in organized paranoia if you spend too much time on it. The fact will always remain that our limited human brains cannot forecast the future with great accuracy. Whether you see it as a shortcoming of man or a part of God's design, it must be accepted that nobody can predict the future with perfect certainty. To then try to have a solution ready for every possible permutation in your plan is an exercise in futility.

A mistake we often make is to compress all possible problems and delays into a small time frame. You see, while planning you attempt to list most or all of the mishaps that could occur. When you sit back to look at this list of mishaps, you tend to forget that they could happen over the lifespan of your endeavor, one at a time, and instead inadvertently think it could all happen simultaneously. Your mind takes all possible problems and wrongfully compresses them into one giant hurdle. You then feel as if you need an answer for all possible scenarios.

In reality though all possible problems do not occur at once; they present themselves as several smaller hurdles that can be dealt with one or two at a time. Most problems are not something that nobody else has faced either, meaning help is at hand from the following sources:

#1: Online communities, resources and information centers (as well as physical ones)

#2: Professional consultants (admittedly you pay for these)

#3: Friends and family

This means that even if you don't have the solution, someone else is very likely to.

Also don't forget you will also usually have a fair amount of time to devise a solution should an unforeseen hiccup occur. Your plan should have the main bases covered, then as you implement it make adjustments according to the way your situation plays out. Don't let your plan become a doomsday list: instead of helping to ensure a smooth journey it then becomes a hindrance.

The only time the walls can come in on you at once is if you've done something criminal or you managed your risk in a grossly negligent and naive way. Other than that remember the purpose of a plan is to increase your probability of success, it isn't there to insure against all failure.

Winners Analyze, Losers Criticize

Listen to the excuses a person makes after an underwhelming outcome, and usually you will find the same group of reasons cropping up: either the market wasn't behaving rationally (investing), the other team played dirty (sport), the contract was awarded to the highest bribe (business), the economy is bad (business again), or the other person was unwilling to change (relationships).

It's one of the most difficult things on earth to be introspective and objective about your shortcomings fresh on the heels of a failure. A society that's only interested in results and nothing else doesn't encourage you to be candid about your errors either. However, while pointing a finger outward may shirk responsibility and can even be therapeutic, it will not bring any progress. Excuses like the list above are now so common to the point that they have become worn out clichés. Worse yet is that they are generally acknowledged as logical, valid reasons: they make perfect sense at a conversational level.

Dangerously these excuses start blinding you to the truth. This blindness and denial -- rather than some isolated failure -- turns people into losers over time, because without truthful introspection one can never improve. When you blame an external situation you don't analyze your own actions further, hence there is no personal advancement. You can't improve if you refuse to acknowledge what you did wrong.

With time and repetition these excuses become self-fulfilling prophecies, ever more powerful each time. And with an excuse-based mind set you will continue to think and perform at the same level you always did. After a few attempts you will become disenchanted, convinced that Lady Luck doesn't favor you and eventually quit, when the hard truth was you didn't step your game up or change your angle of approach where necessary.

If you probe a generalized excuse you will usually find it to be baseless. A generalized circumstance either doesn't apply or has negligible impact on you if it does. The fact is most factors are within your control most of the time. Worded differently, you could say that the factors which matter most are controllable. Irrepressible influences like market sentiment, government policy or the weather could set you back, but they never mark the closing chapter.

You can adjust your sails to a change in wind direction and still get to your desired destination. If the stock market is volatile, stay out the market or hedge your risk by investing in an alternate sector and employing a stop-loss strategy. If the other sporting team plays dirty and gets away with it you should question why you're even competing in such a league or sport and shift to one where the playing field is level. There's always a choice and you must never allow circumstances to dictate and dominate.

Forget all excuses. Once in a blue moon they actually are valid, but from a psychological and personal performance standpoint they don't help. Accept full liability for all results and calmly proceed to break down what you did in an objective post-mortem. If you take things very personally then imagine you're critiquing someone else -- you're more objective when you're less self-conscious.

After any disappointment identify what you need to do differently next time, implement it then analyse the result again. Keep repeating this loop until the results become favorable. Believe and behave as if the result is fully in your hands, and that too will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Lessons from The Dark Knight Rises

Unlike your typical superhero movie, *The Dark Knight Rises* explores themes beyond the usual battle of good versus evil. Of course it's about saving Gotham City, but many sub-themes ensure this isn't a linear movie. For instance Alfred (Bruce Wayne's butler), being far from the yes-man he traditionally used to be in older iterations of *Batman*, opines that money channeled correctly can effect much more change than a caped hero trying to physically save the city one person at a time. Gotham City needs Bruce Wayne, not Batman, he argues.

The movie also demonstrates what could happen if the people were just left to govern themselves without any government, police or army in place: suffice to say it's chaos. Director Christopher Nolan insinuates that a catalyst for such chaos would be rising inequality and a madman to capitalize on people's frustration. Some places in the world are not far off from such a scenario.

Most curious though was how much of the movie's running time involved Bruce Wayne trapped in Bane's prison. Badly assaulted by the villainous Bane with a resultant broken back, Bruce Wayne must heal and then escape if he is to save Gotham from destruction. See, in his prison Bane provides his 'inmates' something more torturous than solitary confinement. Look to the heavens and there's a high wall leading to freedom, if you can climb it. This wall has few protrusions decent enough for your hands to grip. At one point in your climb you need to jump from one ledge to another, and this jump is where most trying to escape fail. Freedom is so close, yet nearly impossible to attain. Only the daughter of Ducard (the man who trained Bruce Wayne) escaped when she was a child.

Bane is generous enough to permit anybody wanting to climb a safety rope too, so should you fall you will be fine barring any painful rebound against the circumference of the wall. After numerous failed attempts with the safety rope, Bruce Wayne learns from another prisoner that Ducard's daughter escaped without any safety rope at all. This fear of death, says the wise prisoner, rather than Bruce Wayne's absence of it, is the strongest driving force existent in man.

You can guess what happened when Bruce Wayne grew a pair and decided to climb and make that critical jump without the rope. So it seems as if the lesson is you need to go for broke, to do something as if it's a matter dying if you fail. But on the other side of the coin it's also about the complacency that sets in when there's a safety net. Often we try hard, but we don't give it everything. People doing part time businesses hoping to leave their jobs and become independent often make half-attempts at their ventures. Their salaries pay for their mortgage and food, so they're not forced to make it work: they are merely mildly motivated in most cases, much less compelled. If on the other hand you resolve to hand your resignation in no matter what within twelve months, you will perform with more urgency. Hand your resignation in tomorrow, and you will run your business like Emily Rose possessed. Resigning tomorrow would be risky, yes, not to mention stressful, but nothing will extract maximum performance out of you like the fear of losing everything.

Safety nets are a good thing strictly speaking; it's just our resultant complacency that makes them a hindrance to achievement. So can one keep their safety net yet perform like their life depends on it? Only the most conscientious can. You need to pretend you are doing something to save

your life and that of your family. The possibility of failure must become unpalatable. While the dream of a better, more comfortable life can be motivation, it is not quite as powerful as the fear of loss. That's the way we're wired: for survival.

Excluding Yourself

People can quip many reasons for not taking a career path or venture on. Practically all of us have a list of success criteria conditioned into us based on a combination of that we read, watch and hear growing up. These criteria are what we measure ourselves against before deciding whether to travel down a path or not. If we don't meet just a few of them we write our chances off almost immediately. People -- in their minds or aloud -- quip reasons like:

• I didn't go to a prestigious high school.

• My parents aren't rich.

• I didn't go to an Ivy League university.

• I'm not based in Silicon Valley therefore cannot create a major Internet site.

Most of the time you don't openly or consciously measure yourself against these factors: it's not as if you sit down and list such things on paper. These factors and criteria usually play in the back of one's head on an unconscious level, but that's still enough to stop you from doing something. Fundamental decisions in life are mostly taken on an unconscious level in any case. Yet you can't ignore certain exceptions:

• Francois Pinault (owner of Gucci and Puma among others) didn't only not go to a fancy school, he dropped out of high school altogether. He is worth about $9 billion dollars today.

• Tim Cook (Apple C.E.O.) went to Auburn University, a non-Ivy League public college.

• Peter Jackson (*Lord of the Rings* director) was born to a factory worker and accounting clerk.

• Amazon.com was founded in and continues to be headquartered from Seattle.

We live in an exciting time because your school, background and location matter less and less. Of course going to a good school and university are advantageous, and having rich parents does give you more options at the beginning of any career. But the Internet is helping to democratize every aspect of our lives and creating platforms for everyone to use. Information is being exchanged more and any person on the globe can be reached with ease.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) of all people is opening itself up, free of charge, to the world, by providing some of its course material online and free of charge. The Khan Academy is a fully pro bono resource that teaches skills ranging from music composition to programming. Knowledge and people are more accessible than ever, and this spells more opportunity (even if the playing field isn't perfectly level, which it probably never will be). The walls of exclusivity are being broken.

A trend may point toward something and that can influence your idea of what it takes to be successful (e.g. many successful tech start-ups happen to emanate from Stanford students), but these are trends, not rules. Be careful not to turn a trend or statistic into a compulsory condition

for your success. Don't exclude yourself. There's always a reason you can't do something remarkable. But it is only by ignoring those very reasons that you can become great.

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PART III: Livelihood

Why Becoming Self-Employed is Imperative

Working for others has become demanding to the point where the breaking point is actually here -- it's not just a sentiment, and it's not just because of the recent economic meltdown. The following ingredients have been brewing for many years, to give the untenable situation we have today:

Globalization: When the Bamboo Curtain lifted allowing foreign companies to set up their plants in China, most developed countries saw their manufacturing bases reduced to practically nothing within a decade. Steel production, automotive and electronics manufacturing -- previous bedrocks of Europe and the United States of America -- are today highly concentrated in Asian countries.

In addition to this people are now also competing against robots and computers for jobs. "Thanks to the merger of, and advances in, globalization and the information technology revolution, every boss now has cheaper, easier access to more above-average software, automation, robotics, cheap labour and cheap genius than ever before," writes Thomas L. Friedman in a *New York Times* article called Average is Over. "Globalization and the Internet/telecom/computing revolution together challenge every town, worker and job…The credo of the Chief Executive Officer today is: 'You only hire someone -- anywhere -- if you absolutely have to,' if a smarter machine, robot or computer program is not available."

Everybody is trying to become "globally competitive" i.e. relentlessly cut costs. Meanwhile multinationals continue to move their factories, call centres, I.T. departments and any business function they can to where labour and skills are cheaper. Even the hallowed all-American Apple, Inc. has most of its products made at the Foxconn facility in China. Make no mistake, this migration of jobs is occurring at skilled levels too. Most jobs -- not only those relating to the assembly line -- are under scrutiny and this places more burden on people to work harder than ever to justify their positions.

Instant communication, information and email: Not long ago you could only be reached by landline or post. Typically you would only receive work while you were at the office and requests came in controlled, manageable lots. Now you can be reached while you're on leave or after hours on your mobile phone. Work can be done remotely from home with your laptop and company sponsored internet connection. The effect is that there is no cut-off point as you work and receive information around the clock. Your mind struggles to keep up with this relentless flow of information.

In their research paper titled *The problem of information overload in business organisations*, Angela Edmunds and Anne Morris of Loughborough University noted:

"The machines we have invented to produce, manipulate and disseminate information generate information much faster than we can process it. It is apparent that an abundance of information, instead of better enabling a person to do their job, threatens to engulf and diminish his or her

control over the situation. It is now widely recognised that stress can be experienced from a feeling of lack of control. We can unwittingly allow information technology to become the driver instead of harnessing it as a tool to enhance our lives."

Shareholder pressure: In 2009, companies had the rug pulled out from under them by the recession. Just one year later many of these companies posted near record profits again. The economy didn't recover and these companies did not make any more sales, yet they still improved on their profitability. This was mainly done through rigorous cost cutting -- mostly by slashing jobs.

A company's board of directors and even the C.E.O. in many cases are employed by the shareholder. Year in, and year out, shareholders want more profit so that the value of their stockholding increases. Each year pressure is passed to employees to work harder, smarter, faster…all for the same, or marginally higher, salary.

Constant improvement: We are never satisfied. In business it's all about cost reduction, higher revenues, and getting things done faster. (This isn't to say there should not be innovation and invention, but too many management teams want to chomp away at what has already been cut to the bone.) At home it's about making the most of our limited leisure time by trying to pack in as much activity as possible. Every day we push the envelope in all aspects of our lives.

We want to find something to do with every second and every penny. It's about doing more than before, relentlessly squeezing more output from the same amount of time and resources. This is more of a culture that's been engendered over time rather than just human nature. Sure, corporations keep asking more of their employees, but we also keep asking more of ourselves and this self-imposed culture of never being content is now more harmful than good.

When she was an Economics lecturer at Harvard University, Juliet B. Schor wrote a topical book titled *The Overworked American*. She says that from 1948 to 1990 the productivity of the U.S. worker has more than doubled. Improvements in efficiency of our methods, machinery and computing power have enhanced our ability to produce. By 1990, every worker in the U.S. could have taken off every other year with pay, yet still produce the same output they did as in 1948. Yet you won't find a company that has passed that productivity improvement on to employees in the form of some extra leave or pay. If productivity increases then more output is expected of you, but nothing is given to you. This applies to professional skilled jobs as well.

Being employed is not a matter of getting the job done; it's about having the maximum extracted out of you.

Extract from The Happy Uprising: A Passionate yet Pragmatic approach to Fulfilment

Five Reasons to Start a Venture

#1: Control. You exercise more control over your own business than anything else. Success or failure mainly depends on how well you execute. You have no control over the stock price of the shares you buy, for instance.

#2: Skills. Running your own venture will allow you to gain a very broad cross section of financial skills like marketing, cost control and negotiating. This will stand you in good stead for whatever else you may later branch off into.

#3: Confidence. When you get that first sale or deal, your confidence is boosted more than any words of encouragement can. All the while you will be accumulating capital for future expansion.

#4: Creativity. Nothing allows you to express your ideas and creativity like your own venture. It's time you gave yourself a creative outlet and the opportunity to call the shots in your life.

#5: Scalability. Things like real estate require large capital outlay. A business can be started from your home and expanded as your customers or clients grow. Hence in spite of the sentiment that business is risky, the risk can be controlled.

How do you Decide what to Sell?

Typically experts will tell you to sell something only if there's a market for it and demand is sufficient, but market demand is tricky to determine. They also encourage you to find a niche for yourself; however trying to carve a niche is not just difficult but can inadvertently limit your appeal to an unduly small segment of customers. All that said, you can actually create demand for your offering. Demand is created when you provide utility, appropriate pricing and customer engagement beyond the ordinary.

Utility

Utility can be described as the functionality or satisfaction a customer derives from your offering. People part with their money for something when it gives them convenience or enhances their lives.

Providing convenience frees up time and energy for your customers to do other things with their lives. People use tailors, hire photographers, frequent car washes and consult event planners to take care of tasks or needs that they don't really want to tend to themselves. Most don't even cater for any of their birthdays any longer: they hire someone to do it. Time is very scarce and people have little energy left after work. This is where opportunity lies for someone starting a business: consumers willingly part with their money for convenience, as the one thing even more valuable than money is time. You may notice that convenience is largely service driven.

When your offering enhances it makes a situation better than it was before. A network connecting people with common interests, using your specialised knowledge to help another business improve its product quality, or an application that allows one to track their daily calorie intake and burn are the sorts of things that your customers would find useful and value adding.

Enhancement usually (but not always) requires more skill and capital than convenience. When you supply convenience you are freeing people of a burden. When you enhance something you render lives and situations better as a direct result of what you provide. Both enhancement and convenience make money though, so don't look at one as the poor cousin of the other.

You need to be practical about the way you start off. Convenience is usually the quicker way to get going. You may need to take a few interim steps before starting that revolutionary robotics company you want, because you might not initially have the capital to give things the kick start it needs. While that's something for you to consider, often there is something enhancing you can create with what you have in front of you (Carla White's *Gratitude Journal* comes to mind). Ultimately the only important thing is that your planned business falls somewhere on this convenience-enhancement spectrum.

Pricing

Use competitors to benchmark against and then match or slightly undercut their prices. Value for money is crucial for any business, especially one that's starting off. As individuality and uniqueness is built in, you will have more power to dictate your prices. This is why Apple can charge more for the Mac: because they have differentiated their product, they have made the

packaging slick and the user interface uniquely Apple. Having an Apple product is a sign of being different -- even though for the most part it shares its componentry with cheaper computers.

Word of warning: don't undercut by too much. Going in much cheaper than the rest of the market can backfire. While consumers appreciate value for money, they also want to feel they're making a quality purchase, and the price tag they see forms part of this perception. An extremely low price will make many of them question this quality. Be competitive, but don't be cheap.

Customer Engagement

Customers and clients need to be delighted, not just served. This is your show now, so let the world know you fully stand by what you do. Viewed this way, a great customer experience should come without you trying very much. Loving what you do is not just a pleasantry. The dots will connect when you find it so much easier to sell something you believe in.

Customer engagement can go so much further than mere kindness. My friend Eran Eyal entered the saturated t-shirt arena with a business called Springleap.com. Springleap.com allows any willing party to submit t-shirt designs to them. If Eran and his team pick your submission to go on their t-shirts, you will receive a royalty for each garment sold with your design on it. With a basic product Eran and his partner Eric Edelstein built interest, customer demand and community by engaging people in a way that most clothing retailers do not. They created demand in a saturated sector with minimal marketing spend.

A balance of utility, pricing and customer engagement is how demand can be created for any offering. The marketing is built into these facets. Competition exists in almost every avenue, so don't try too hard to find something unique. True, there are lots of people selling things, but then again there are also lots of consumers in this virtuous cycle.

The pie is always big enough for the player who can create demand for her offering. From the day they bought a small yoghurt factory from Kraft Foods (because Kraft were exiting the yoghurt business), Chobani became a dominant player in what was said to be a saturated market. Founder Hamdi Ulukaya said, "What Chobani does is increase consumption levels and bring more people to the category." They create demand.

Extract from The Happy Uprising: A Passionate yet Pragmatic approach to Fulfilment

Sell people what they Need, not what you can make them Buy

A good salesman may be able to sell refrigerators to Eskimos, but it would be a lot easier to sell them something they would use, like a snowmobile.

Salesmen of the right calibre were and still are able to generate strong sales. But their job in the 21st century is also to find a customer that fits the product they're selling; it is not just to sell to the first person that they can convince/coerce/deceive. For too long many in sales sold people things they didn't need or really want. Hence the generalised and unfair reputation all people in sales suffer today…Consumers are reluctant to trust them before they can even say a word.

Pushing a sale onto someone can get them to buy once and help you meet quarterly targets, but once that person realises they bought something more because of a sales pitch, flattering smile or likeable personality rather than the product itself, they're not going to buy from you again.

Nobody can be fooled Twice

Once is the maximum number of times you can dupe a person. Consumers are wiser and better informed before they buy, and even if they make a mistake they won't repeat it.

Here's my belief: it's better to have forty loyal customers than five hundred once-off customers. Forty loyal, happy customers will become repeat buyers and tell their friends about you if the topic of your product or industry ever comes up. A loyal customer is a gift that keeps on giving and they're a powerful factor in growing a revenue stream. Before even thinking about making a sale, first identify whether what you have will meet a need or enhance the life of your customer.

Karma doesn't turn a blind eye to business

Serendipity can work in strange ways: when you decline to sell someone your goods out of honesty because they didn't really need it, they could very well refer you to someone who does. The barrier of uncertainty and mistrust would have been broken; you will be seen as someone without ulterior motives. The sale you make today will fill your bank account, but the taste you leave in a person's mouth will fill your karma account. This sort of serendipity and good karma bypasses the person who wants to sell for the wrong reasons. Remember your customer has limited money and many essential things (food, education etc.) they need to allocate that money to.

It sounds radical and foolish to decline a sale, but if lost revenue for today is the cost of gaining unbreakable, lifelong trust then it's worth it. Karma is as real as the hardships you face in business. When trust is there people willingly loosen their purse strings. In the medium to long term, this will become your competitive advantage. (Note: medium to long term in this age isn't long at all.)

Find the right community of people that already want what you're selling, don't always try to make people want what you're selling. When your name and reputation stand on solid ground you will have less of a need to find customers as you will be too busy answering to the ones that are knocking on your door.

Networking: It's not Who you Know, it's Who you Are

My father's friend does $3 million in annual turnover. About 90% of this turnover comes from supplying and installing electrical lighting to shopping centers, office parks and other private sector related projects.

Two weeks ago he drove 35 kilometers after-hours to a household that was going to give him about $500 of business. It's insignificant to his bottom line yet for most of these small jobs he still opts to go by himself instead of sending out a staff member. The reason for this is the networking opportunities these small jobs present.

He doesn't care that the current deal is small; he wants to leave a good taste in the customer's mouth so that they will remember him whenever the topic of lighting comes up in any of their conversations. He will even do a free consult before physically delivering anything to advise what sort of light fittings would suit a given room and budget. Over twenty eight years he has built his network this way. Today's deal could be small, but tomorrow's referral could be life-changing.

Most people aren't born into the right circles. It helps to have a well-known prominent father who can elbow you into an influential circle or network, but:

#1: Members of any network, while partial towards each other, are not perfectly loyal to each other. People who belong to a group are still just people: they're looking for the best value for money and the best possible service. Many will venture outside their circle if that's where the best deal is to be found.

#2: Your network can and probably will be built one person at a time. Through individual kind acts you can build your own inner circle based on meritocracy rather than birth-right. The effects of a kind act are compounded through word of mouth.

A single kind act can be more powerful than membership to an old boys' club or invitation to a contrived networking event. Further to this imagine if everybody who complained that they did not belong to the right clique pooled their resources, smarts and influence together. The power of a network lies in many people agreeing to act in an organized fashion where they leverage each other.

Most people who are ‘outsiders’ act individually rather than in unison. The encouraging news is that there's nothing to stop like-minded people from forming their own networks. Modern day conveniences like mobile communication, crowdsourcing and social media make it that much easier. Thanks to these tools, no question will go unanswered and no request will go unfulfilled (if you persist enough). Old money will continue to exist and hold advantages, but nothing stops those on the outside from aligning with each other. ‘Outsiders’ in business must leverage each other rather than make things difficult by going it alone.

With Capital all things are Possible

Creator of *Mario Brothers* and the Wii gaming console Nintendo started off in 1889 selling playing cards. They proceeded to dabble in taxis, hotels and food. They won some and lost some, but using the profits they accumulated over time they entered the video gaming arena in 1976, where they continue to be a dominant player.

Samsung was founded in 1938 by Lee Byung-chul. He admittedly received an inheritance, but the first thing he opened was an unsuccessful rice mill -- hardly the Samsung we know today. He then tried his hand at trucking and started making some money. Today Samsung make ships, consumer electronics and continue to sell insurance.

You may have intentions to build a Samsung, Nintendo or SpaceX type of company, but these types of operations require a large capital outlay. Don't be afraid to commence with something more practical initially in the interests of generating the cash you need. Technologically advanced sectors are more lucrative but they also carry heavier risks that only capital (and a strong stomach) can absorb. When debt finance and venture capital are hard to raise (a problem thousands of entrepreneurs have), you have to fund expansion and new ventures from your profits. Nintendo failed at taxi services and love hotels, but the capital they accumulated prior to that from selling simple products allowed them to continue to take risks.

First, be practical, then become more idealistic and imaginative when your bank account warrants it. Many of the basic lessons you learn early on from running a simple business will be just as applicable to one that makes rockets. You have the option of evolving and growing into the business you want to have -- it doesn't have to be done in one leap. There's no need to give up on your dream; you may just need to take a few interim steps before you can launch it.

Use your Job Promotion Wisely

Many people work hard to get promoted and sometimes it takes years of slogging. Once that rise in pay eventually comes they feel entitled to "spoil" themselves "a little." That home renovation that they put on hold, new clothes and various other little things all now seem possible. The peril is that it's possible more because a higher salary enables higher debt repayments: it's not so much that a pay increase brings forth a sudden increase in a person's cash holding.

A higher salary simply magnifies the spending habits a person already has. If they are accustomed to purchasing on debt, then they just buy more stuff on their credit cards or increase their mortgage. The bigger paycheck acts as collateral. The taste of better food, clothes and cars becomes intoxicating and using any of that extra money to save or reduce debt becomes a distant sentiment. The salary-consumption-debt cycle continues and in fact intensifies as a person's cravings and materialistic aspirations increase even faster than the size of their paycheck: They've tasted a BMW 3 series, now let's aim for the 5 series. As a result, debt as a percentage of earnings can increase when a person earns more.

This is how an increase in pay usually leads to increased dependence on your job. Ironically the things you buy can literally become trappings of success.

Yet, a pay rise presents a golden opportunity to increase your margin of safety and set yourself up for greater things. You can eliminate your debt: imagine having a positive net worth. Now while having no debt is always a lovely thing, I will also admit it sounds a bit boring. But with the extra cash you can save towards opening a business or creating some sort of venture of your own. At worst you can contribute more towards a retirement fund, which would usher in earlier retirement for you. Sure you can spend some of your increase on toys and life's finer things, but most of your new-found money (I recommend eighty percent) should go to either:

a) Debt repayment

b) Savings or,

c) Investments

Getting worked to the bone is the new normal

Let's face it: an employee earns every cent of their salary. Companies extract all they can out of you. With that promotion comes an increase in workload and responsibility. You can't keep working at the level you currently do forever. Time takes it's toll and I've often seen it on aged former colleagues. They struggle to keep working at the pace management demands and by then it's too late for them to do anything but wait for retirement to come.

No job in this day and age is secure either. You can be promoted today and retrenched next year. I'm not trying to incite paranoia, but with globalization, ever-increasing automation and the desire to relentlessly cut costs, all companies are always on the lookout for where they can get things done cheaper.

Robots are reducing the need for people on assembly lines. If you have a desk job you're competing with educated, job-hungry people across the world, many of them willing to do what you do for half the pay. This is a fact of the new global economy, so instead of shackling yourself to your job by buying more stuff, you should use the money from any increase to pave a new way forward.

Risk and Instant Gratification

Not one hasty decision I've made has had a positive outcome. Be it a hot stock pick without conducting much due diligence or an impulsive purchase, I tend to come off worse than before when I base a decision on limited information and a lust for quick results.

Getting towards something slowly admittedly isn't very sexy. We're a culture of Now. We want to get rich quickly and buy into things that promise quick results. Why buy boring mutual funds when there are financial derivatives that are geared ten times? (A derivative which is geared ten times means that your gains or losses are amplified by ten-fold, depending on whichever way a stock price moves. If a share price moves up by $1, you can make $10 and vice versa).

When someone is star-struck by the lure of quick results and money they forget to account for the impact of a setback. Having a contingency in case of failure isn't cynicism, it's pragmatism: setbacks and outright failures can happen in spite of your best intentions and hardest work.

Here's one thing I know about slow results: they can be replicated. Great results that came slowly occurred as a result of many carefully thought out and conscientious actions. The lessons you learn will help you achieve a positive outcome quicker the next time. Where there's less luck involved you're thus better equipped to repeat any success.

The thing about fast results is they're hard to replicate and often depend on uncontrollable factors to give them a tailwind. Making money on a derivative for instance depends on short term movements of a stock price, and nobody I know can control a stock price. With short term irrationality and talk of regular price manipulation on the markets, it would take a brave person to fancy their chances at consistently making correct calls on a share's short-term price movements. Sure, if you make a right call you can pull off a large win, but you can't expect them consistently because there's no real blueprint for quick results in life. Quick results are too dependent on externalities rather than acumen.

If I had just invested the money I blew on a hot stock into the blue chip company I ignored I would have been richer today. Sometimes luck can go your way, but still, in the pursuit of quick results you should only invest an amount of time and/or money that you are happy with writing off, because just as success is possible, so too is spectacular outright failure when you take a shortcut. Success and failure go hand in hand: one cannot exist without the other. So while you must have every intention and make every attempt to succeed, best you be prepared to deal with both before commencing with anything risky.

Pick your Battles

The Airbus A380 can take 525 passengers with a three class arrangement, while the Boeing 747-400 can accommodate 416 people with a similar three class system. The Airbus has displaced the Boeing as the largest passenger plane in the skies: it's bigger by every measure and is no doubt a more impressive plane. (Out of interest, the Antanov An-225 is even larger than the Airbus A380, but the Antanov doesn't cart passengers around, it's a cargo plane).

The first question that pops to mind is: what's Boeing going to do in response to the A380? The answer is very little. Boeing is doing the smart thing by simply modifying the 747. The latest iteration of Boeing's jumbo, the 747-800, can fit 467 people, reducing the gap to the A380 to 58.

Design and development costs: Zero

The 747 was introduced in 1970, yes, it's approaching half a century. Boeing have long since recovered all major design and development costs, and profit per unit sold will be much higher than the Airbus A380. Airbus have to build in that massive $13.8 billion spend on research and development into the price of every A380 they sell. At the last check, they need to sell 420 units just to break even.

Let's not forget the teething problems associated with bringing a new plane to the market. With due respect to consumer electronics companies, introducing a new jumbo jet isn't exactly like bringing a new tablet to the market. A 500 ton plane with hundreds of people on board cannot put a foot/wing wrong, ever. Airbus have had delays, budget overruns and lost orders due to the constant hiccups associated with introducing their new aircraft model. Reports of fractures on the A380 do no good for its reputation either, especially in the face of the proven, near bulletproof 747.

Boeing have gone through the pain a long time ago and have an intimate knowledge of every nut, bracket and circuit board on the 747. They know with confidence that everything works on their plane, so will be very reluctant towards any major re-design.

Airbus created the A380 because they didn't have a jumbo jet. Boeing designed a very good one a long time ago and it still does the job. To spend billions to research a super jumbo just to add another 50 to 100 passengers to its 747 wouldn't make sense to Boeing.

Focus on the Right Metrics

In 2008 Toyota became the world's number one automaker. This wasn't by profit (they were the most profitable many years before that), but rather by manufacturing volume. Making more cars than General Motors was a long-held, highly prioritized milestone for Toyota.

Toyota's euphoria was short-lived, as reports of sticky accelerator pedals that made the car accelerate even when the driver took her foot off the pedal surfaced everywhere in 2009. Many of these reports were admittedly fabricated, but some were undisputed. This drove Toyota to recall hundreds of thousands of vehicles worldwide.

Finally breaking his silence on the issue after several weeks, Toyota CEO Akio Toyoda had this to say: "Toyota has, for the past few years, been expanding its business rapidly. Quite frankly, I fear the pace at which we have grown may have been too quick. I would like to point out here that Toyota's priority has traditionally been the following: First; Safety, Second; Quality, and Third; Volume. These priorities became confused, and we were not able to stop, think, and make improvements as much as we were able to before, and our basic stance to listen to customers' voices to make better products has weakened somewhat. We pursued growth over the speed at which we were able to develop our people and our organization."

Now Audi has stated it will become the number one luxury car maker by volume by "2020 at the latest," revised from an initially promised 2015. In this race between Mercedes Benz, BMW and Audi to occupy the top spot in the luxury sector, you now find them trying to fill every possible niche with a model. The Audi Q5 was supposed to be a smaller sibling to the large Q7 SUV, but to squeeze a few more sales they recently brought in a marginally smaller Q3. The price difference between the Q5 and Q3 is also minuscule. The Q3 makes no sense, but because of this race the market is being flooded by an unprecedented number of niche models with little substance to differentiate them.

Going for the number one spot is usually a matter of ego more than economic sense. The push to become number one, once turned into a concrete company-wide objective by upper management, is typically done in haste. This hasty push can cause latent problems for the company.

Costs go up and overall profitability can actually decrease

Building new manufacturing facilities to cope with the increase in volume takes long, so most car makers opt to reduce takt times (the number of minutes taken to produce a vehicle) at existing facilities instead. Every machine and person has to work faster. More machinery, more workers and more overtime are required, meaning increased marginal costs per unit.

Don't forget too that at least forty percent of a car comprises of components made by automotive supply companies e.g. Bosch (electrical parts), Firestone (tires), Armstrong (shock absorbers). These suppliers will also need increased capital investment, training for new staff and new tooling for any substantial volume increase. This gets funded by the automotive manufacturer they supply i.e. BMW, Ford, Nissan etc. So an automotive manufacturer has to foot the bill for their own upgrades as well as their suppliers, and this is usually a costly affair.

Due to the sharp spike in costs, profitability per unit decreases quite drastically and this means the increase in sales and production volumes can actually still result in a lower net profit.

Artificial demand is created but cannot be maintained

Manufacturing orders are demand driven, so assuming the product is on par with the competition it's mostly up to sales and marketing to create that additional demand needed to reach number one. Now at any given time the sales and marketing guys are working as hard as they can to push cars off the showroom floor, so when they need to sell even more they resort to increasing existing incentives like offering greater discounts and easier payment terms.

As a result of reduced prices profit margins become thin for dealers. But once volumes increase everybody is temporarily happy, until they realize that such margins can't go on indefinitely and normal pricing has to return. Long term damage to your brand can occur when you consistently sell for lower prices than the people you were meant to compete directly against. The car market is about exclusivity and perception as much as it is about value.

Then just as you as a car maker reach number one and normality slowly but inevitably returns to your pricing, your competitor just below you will then decide they want your mantle. They then pull out all the stops that you did to achieve that temporary boost; your volumes decrease as you lose sales to them and then all that money you spent on hiring new staff, paying overtime and buying new tooling will have amounted to little more than rights to a floating trophy with Biggest Manhood in the Industry inscribed on it. The cycle keeps repeating itself as everybody jostles for this floating trophy.

Quality compromises

Because takt time decreases, there is haste throughout the manufacturing process at both automotive companies and their suppliers. Quality checks are also sped up. Things will inevitably slip through the cracks, sometimes to devastating consequences as demonstrated by Toyota.

Becoming number one should be incidental, not intentional

If people are buying your product because you're consistently hitting the sweet spot of value, quality and marketing better than your rivals, then your place at the top of the pile is deserved. The climb to number one is just that: a climb. It has to be carefully managed and sustainable. Quickly leaping to number one in such a competitive industry usually means you did it through making short term decisions and your glory will consequentially be short lived. Being number one should just be a perk that's incidental to a well-run company: it shouldn't be an objective in itself.

Self Employment Vs. Working for Yourself

Working for Others

• Financial reward is limited to your salary and a few perks.

• Your personal life goes on hold e.g. personal errands/calls/emails are very difficult to tend to.

• Your creativity is stifled. Your ideas are drowned by other employees and needs to undergo approval by others before being implemented.

• You have little or no control over your workload. Deadlines are determined for you.

Working for Yourself

• Financial reward is derived from the profit you make and is potentially unlimited.

• You answer to yourself. You can take care of personal errands without anyone's approval.

• You can implement an idea very quickly without anybody's approval. Your creativity develops and expands quickly.

• You have the freedom to choose what work/projects to take on. You also have greater control over your workload and deadlines.

You work at least eight hours a day, five days a week. Choosing between the above two paths is the most important decision you will make in your life. Choose wisely.

A Fermenting Idea

If there's an idea you fancy, be careful with what you do with it immediately after conceiving it. You can keep it in your head, implement it, talk about it or forget it. Alongside sharing your idea with someone cynical though, the greatest harm you can do to an idea is to perpetually think about it (i.e. keep it in your head). When you think about something too much, you give your mind the time to ponder every possible angle and permutation:

• What if the idea is already taken?

• What if the market is saturated?

• What if people think it's a dumb idea?

• What if my costs escalate beyond what I budgeted?

• How would failure affect my standing with my peers, friends, family and acquaintances?

• What if the competition steals my idea?

• What if my existing competitors have superior funding?

• What if my marketing strategy doesn't entice people?

• What if customers don't pay accounts and I fall into negative cash flow?

• What if I just invested my money in a nice mutual fund instead with much lower risk?

• What if I put my idea on hold and just pay my mortgage off first?

The list of doubts can be extended pages down if given ample time. Excessive thinking inevitably leads you down a road that stops with a dead-end sign. You may feel that it's pragmatic to think things through and have all bases covered, and to a degree that's correct. However you can ponder and research for years, even decades, and you still won't have mitigation for every possibility. This is what I call thinking yourself into a hole. Thinking has to stop at the inflection point where analysis turns to paranoia. You don't need many reasons not to do something; just one compelling reason is enough to stop you. The thing is there's always a compelling reason not to action absolutely any idea.

An idea locked in the chamber of your mind and suffocated from physical expression will ferment and rot into a wishful fantasy that gets written off. The best part is you will be convinced it wasn't a feasible idea to start off with.

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PART IV: Reflections for the Soul

You're Reborn Every Day

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." Heraclitus of Ephesus

The human body is not a static entity as its cells are in a constant state of renewal. As a result of this you have a completely new liver every five months. Your taste buds are no older than ten days. You have a completely new skin every four weeks (your skin is the largest organ you have). Your skeleton replaces itself completely every ten years. In fact, besides for your brain and heart, no part of you is older than a decade.

Each morning that you wake up millions of cells have been replaced. Literally speaking, you are not the same person you were yesterday.

What we don't renew as often as our cells are our habits, perceptions and mental constructs. Physical renewal is a wonderful mechanism, but mental and situational renewal are crucial too. Too many allow past hardships and failures to accumulate into a residue that obstructs them from taking any new or bold action. They become the same person every day, perpetuating the same life and refusing to believe that any radical change is plausible.

Whether you feel you're stuck in a dead-end job, toxic relationship or violent neighborhood, it is an illusion to think that your current situation is what the rest of your life is consigned to. Conscious renewal needs commitment though because it doesn't happen automatically like cellular renewal. And in the same way that any part of your body needs a few days or months to renew itself, change to any situation in your life requires daily action and the patience to allow that action to yield a result.

Don't consign yourself to your past. You're a new person every day and your failures in the past have no bearing on today. The river you step into today is a different river to the one you stepped into yesterday, meaning that like people situations and external circumstances are also dynamic. What didn't work in the past could work if you try it again. It's not always insanity to do the same thing and expect a different result.

As is the case with your body, your external situation may appear to change little on a daily basis, but small changes compounded will accumulate and after some weeks or months you will notice meaningful change. Transformation is usually deceptive and discreet rather than apparent and overt.

How to Meditate

Meditation is the most fundamental way to still your mind. It is a state of thoughtless awareness where you aren't observing any particular thought or possibility. In meditation you are simply aware that you are alive. This is meant to be a primordial experience. When you revert to full consciousness and face the usual hustle and bustle of life, it is easy for your mind to lose its bearings. Stillness is therefore something that has to be gained then maintained.

Imagine your mind as a wild stallion in a small enclosure. The stallion is going to jump, kick and act wild for much of the day simply because of the frustrating boundaries imposed on him. You can try any number of disciplinary techniques and to force him to comply but your success will be limited. If you opened the enclosure and let him run free, he would dart out and run like the wind for a few minutes. Soon enough though he will realise there is no need to run because nobody is trying to capture him. He will then slow down and peacefully graze. It is freedom, not confinement or control, that tames the stallion.

You should follow the same principal with meditation. First and foremost, find a quiet place. Then sit on a comfortable chair and keep your eyes open. Just sit still for five minutes, wide awake. Let the thoughts flow, don't try to control anything. Simply observe your thoughts without judgement or opinion. Let your heart rate and breathing drop. Then close your eyes, continuing to permit the thoughts in your head complete freedom. (Important: do not lay on a bed because you're very likely to fall asleep.) In the silence, start listening to your breath: the air entering and exiting your lungs. Place all your attention on the simplicity of your breathing. Your mind will continue along its train of thought while your attention is on your breathing. Let the thoughts flow without judgement, fear or fondness.

When you concentrate on your breath, your mind will start to see that it's futile to think because your attention isn't following it. Your mind will finally start to settle. Your chest will feel lighter and so will your head. All you will hear and think is silence. It will be liberating to say the least. You are now in a state of meditation or thoughtless awareness.

Extract from The Happy Uprising: A Passionate yet Pragmatic approach to Fulfilment

The Principle of Appreciation

My cousins played a lot of club Soccer during our younger days and as you could probably deduce they followed professional Soccer on television. Having only kicked a ball around a few times, whenever a match is broadcasted I see little more than a bunch of men who are proficient at kicking a ball and pretending to get hurt at the slightest touch. But as a result of playing many matches my cousins understand and appreciate better than me how difficult it is to muster the level of skill displayed at professional level. They're also less dismissive and critical of the game than I am.

The level of appreciation we express for anything is strongly correlated to our involvement with the object of appreciation. This principle of appreciation applies to anything in life. These days for instance consumers and tech critics often decry the "lack of innovation" from some smartphone manufacturer or the other. And how often do we dismiss what others do as "easy," or our country's government employees as "lazy and incompetent?"

But when you're the one working at the smartphone maker's research and development team trying to find revolutionary improvements on a phone that already does most of what a personal computer can do, you will see how hard it is to even incrementally improve the product. If tomorrow you become a government employee dealing with never-ending lines of citizens at a licensing office, doing pretty much the same thing day in day out, you will start to see how hard some government employees do try.

It's easy to complain and under-appreciate anything from a distance, until you try doing it.

Deepak Chopra alluded to this principle when he furnished the sunset as an example of how the same thing can be experienced and appreciated on different levels by different people. A busy executive may own a lavish home on the coast of Santa Monica yet may not even notice the sunset when he drives home, because his mind is so preoccupied. At the same time a couple may sit a few meters from his home on a public bench and remark at that sunset's beauty. But the woman who pulls out her canvas to capture the sunset on a painting is the one who is extracting the most of that sunset. She is creating something out of the experience; her appreciation is active rather than passive.

The artist has to look a bit deeper than the observing couple and capture more detail: the different hues of the sky, the warped reflection of the sun's silhouette on the ocean, any flying birds and lots of other peripheral detail you don't typically notice if you're observing in a passive manner. The person who actively engages an object finds the most joy and appreciation in that object.

Of course you shouldn't paint a picture of everything or always try doing what other people get paid to do. Have an opinion and complain when you feel you've been treated unfairly -- it's your right. But if you find yourself constantly writing off or criticizing what someone else does and it actually annoys you, then you should try doing it yourself. When you resolve to respond in this way rather than only criticize, you could very well find yourself complaining less and appreciating more.

Stop Wishing for Time to go Faster

"I wish this week/day would fly by," you often hear people say. In most cases it's because they want the weekend to arrive or maybe their annual leave is imminent. Sometimes they just want a respite from work. For them this day needs end soon if they are to be happy again.

It's an illusion to think some days are better than others. The day is neutral; it's what we do with that day that makes it what it is. What is often referred to as a "big day" is merely a climax of prior preparation and anticipation. Swimming for a gold medal, delivering a good speech or closing a deal had days or years of work going on behind that success.

Furthermore no single day of preparation is more important than the other. Each day of preparation forms the foundation for the next. For instance on Monday you may have written the opening of your speech; on Tuesday you would have conducted some research; during Wednesday you could have written the body of the speech; concluded, edited and proofread it on Thursday; and rehearsed it on Friday. All this preparation culminates into that "big day" when you deliver your speech to an audience. Remove any one of those days and the final delivery of your speech would be flawed.

Every moment is consequential to the next and no single moment in time is less important than another. If you think of any event in life you will see that this principle always applies.

People will wish for time to pass, then will subsequently complain with a jaded expression at how time flies. When you feel that time is dragging, it's a good thing. Don't ever wish for time to go faster. If you do, it means you're wasting it.

You don't need to Know the Whole Journey Ahead

Your life usually changes pretty drastically every five years or so. Think of it as Moore's law for humans. While Moore's law says our computer chips get faster by two fold every three years, it is not to be taken as some irrefutable formula per se but rather as a trend that's held very well for decades. Likewise most will find their lives to have taken a considerable turn if they take stock every five years. That's because many changes happen in half a decade: you lose loved ones to the afterlife; make, renew or break romantic connections; change jobs or careers and even change residence. Any combination of the above will spell great change.

Five years ago did you accurately envisage yourself to be exactly where you are now? Think romantically, financially, spiritually, health-wise, home-wise. I'm going to be bold and say your answer is no. Life is too dynamic by nature to be predictable. Opportunities, setbacks and twists occur that you cannot account for. Unpredictability (not of an unmanageable, chaotic variety though) is hardwired into life. If something is completely predictable it becomes boring, so be grateful that you can't tell the future.

Excessive goal setting

Why then are many people still so infatuated with trying to know and control what fate has in store for them? Excessive planning and goal setting is reflective of this. Nevermind meeting the end-goal, we become pedantic about the way in which it must be met e.g. Go to Oxford University, complete a degree, meet beautiful, intelligent brunette, join Goldman Sachs, manage a hedge fund, make a hundred million in three years, marry, move to the Cayman Islands...

If somewhere along this chain of plans and expectations there's a deviation, what then? If Oxford doesn't accept you, if you get into a medium sized firm instead of Goldman or you don't make that hundred million in three years, is life then failing you?

Stop obsessing over the detail and just keep going

Set objectives and draft a plan to meet them. Work every day and focus on implementing the plan, not on meeting the objective. Be open to turns and curve balls that come your way and adjust your course (albeit without compromising on your overall vision). If you get into a public college instead of Oxford, make it work. If you don't make a hundred million within three years, adjust your time frame to five years and forge on. The important bit is to maximize each day and not be obsessed with how your objective is going to be met or even when it will be met. You have plans, you have deadlines, but sometimes they can't be met in spite of your best efforts. All you can do is work with the resources at your disposal and maximize each day. The rest, as a matter of fact, is out of your control. Life is a mixture of planning and surrender.

One unexpected event that isn't to your liking can form the seed for something else. I had to stay at university one year longer than planned, and in that year I met the woman I now refer to as my wife.

You don't need to know the journey from A to Z. There would be no adventure in life if you did. Jack Canfield, father of the Chicken Soup series of books, said that you only need your car's

headlights to illuminate the next few meters in front of you, and you can drive all the way across the country at night in this fashion. When the road curves, you turn your steering wheel, if a steep hill approaches, you change gear. There's nothing you won't be able to handle and there's no need to know the entire route in advance. With our lives it's no different.

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About me

Born in 1984, I completed my honors degree in commerce and began working life as an auditor in 2008. Dissatisfaction saw me move between accounting, costing and procurement roles...all to no avail. While their requirements were different, I found the same plot underlying all of these careers: unrelenting demands, deadlines, stress, and limited reward.

In this setup, weekends present a period of recovery and relief rather than recreation. I believe that looking forward to the weekend and dreading Mondays is no way to live, as prevalent as this attitude may be. Accepting the ever-popular notion of "that's the way it is" was not an option.

This set in motion a quest for reason-based and experiential substantiation that adult life doesn't have to follow this formula. Imperative was to balance passion with pragmatism, because true happiness is about more than just hope or a positive attitude.

Advocating passive income and entrepreneurial profit as the only realistic ways to become independent, I invest in real estate, stocks and gold medallions. Downtime comprises of exercise, meditation and of course, writing.

The words of Henry James echo: "Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact."

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